

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00
NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 MCT-01 OMB-01
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-----232129 013970 /73

R 231613Z FEB 77
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1915
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
DIA WASHDC
USCINCEUR

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E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS SY
SUBJECT: ASSASSINATION OF DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY RECTOR THREATENS TO
EXACERBATE SECTARIAN TENSIONS IN SYRIA

1. SUMMARY: DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY RECTOR DR. MUHAMMAD AL-FADIL ASSASSINATED ON CAMPUS MORNING FEB 22 BY TWO MEN WHO ESCAPED ON MOTORCYCLE. FADIL WAS LEADING FIGURE WITHIN SYRIA'S ALAWITE COMMUNITY, AND ADVISOR TO PRES. ASAD AND MENTOR TO OTHER SENIOR ALAWITES. HIS DEATH MAY FURTHER EXACERBATE SECTARIAN TENSIONS. TIMING OF INCIDENT, COMING LESS THAN 24 HOURS AFTER SECRETARY'S DEPARTURE, MIGHT ALSO HAVE BEEN AIMED AT COMPLICATING ASAD'S INVOLVEMENT IN SETTLEMENT PROCESS. SECURITY SERVICES ARE CONDUCTING INTENSE INVESTIGATION. END SUMMARY.

2. DR. MUHAMMAD AL-FADIL, RECTOR OF DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY, WAS ASSASSINATED MORNING FEB 22 AS HE ARRIVED ON CAMPUS TO BEGIN NORMAL WORK DAY. ACCORDING TO EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS,
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TWO MEN EMPTIED TWO CLIPS OF BULLETS INTO FADIL AND DEPARTED ON MOTORCYCLE BEFORE SCORES OF HORRIFIED STUDENTS AND FACULTY MEMBERS. BAATH PARTY NATIONAL AND REGIONAL COMMANDS AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS HAVE ISSUED STATEMENTS MOURNING HIS DEATH.

3. FADIL'S ASSASSINATION THREATENS TO EXACERBATE SECTARIAN

TENSIONS IN SYRIA. HE WAS LEADING FIGURE IN SYRIAN ALAWITE COMMUNITY, A PROMINENT LAWYER, AND ADVISOR TO PRES. ASAD AND MENTOR TO MANY SENIOR ALAWITE FIGURES IN REGIME. HE WAS ALSO A LOYAL BAATHIST WHO MAINTAINED EXCELLENT RELATIONS WITH PARTY WHILE SEEKING TO EXPAND UNIVERSITY'S ACTIVITIES INTO AREAS PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED OFF LIMITS, SUCH AS ESTABLISHING POLITICAL SCIENCE DEPARTMENT. ALAWITES HAVE NOT LOST LEADER OF SIMILAR STATURE SINCE ASSASSINATION OF MAJ. GEN. MUHAMMAD UMRAN IN 1971, AND FADIL WAS MORE IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF THIS REGIME THAN UMRAN WHO AT THAT TIME EXILED TO LEBANON. SOME SUNNIS HAVE ALREADY BEGUN TO FEAR STRONG ALAWITE COUNTER-REACTION THAT COULD INCLUDE INCREASINGLY REPRESSIVE SECURITY MEASURES IF EVIDENCE LINKS DISSIDENT SUNNIS TO HIS MURDER.

4. TO DATE THERE IS MUCH SPECULATION, BUT AS YET NO EVIDENCE THAT WE ARE AWARE OF, REGARDING IDENTITY OR MOTIVES OF ASSASSINS. ACCORDING TO A LOCAL TEACHER, SOME TEN DAYS AGO AL-FADIL PERSONALLY SIGNED ORDERS EXPELLING TWENTY PALESTINIAN STUDENTS FROM UNIVERSITY BECAUSE THEY HAD BEEN ENGAGED IN POLITICAL ACTIVITIES. A FORMER LAW STUDENT OF AL-FADIL THOUGHT KILLING WAS WORK OF MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD. OTHER FREQUENTLY MENTIONED SUSPECTS INCLUDE THE IRAQIS, DISSIDENT ALAWITES, AND RIFA'T AL-ASAD OF WHOM MANY SYRIANS READY TO BELIEVE ANYTHING.

5. IF INCIDENT WAS POLITICALLY MOTIVATED, IT REFLECTS SHIFT IN DIRECTION OF INTERNAL OPPOSITION TO REGIME. PREVIOUSLY, ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS HAVE CONCENTRATED ON CONFIDENTIAL

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FIGURES CLEARLY IDENTIFIED WITH SARG OR PARTY APPARATUS, AND ALAWITES KILLED HAVE OFTEN BEEN REPRESENTATIVES OF SECURITY OFFICES, PARTICULARLY IN HAMA AND ALEPPO. SELECTIVE ASSASSINATIONS OF THESE OFFICIALS AT LEAST SEEMED TO MARK ATTEMPT TO UNDERMINE REGIME AND DEVELOP PUBLIC SUPPORT BY ELIMINATING OFFICIALS WHO SYMBOLIZED REPRESSIVE INSTINCTS OF CURRENT REGIME. SOME OF THESE INCIDENTS AS WELL AS ATTEMPTS AGAINST VARIOUS SUNNI LEADERS PROBABLY REFLECTED FACTIONAL STRAINS AS WELL AS SOME IRAQI INSPIRATIONS. FADIL'S DEATH DOES NOT FIT DIRECTLY INTO THIS PATTERN, FOR HIS ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN LEGAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FIELDS REFLECTED NON-SECTARIAN ATTAINMENTS.

6. WHILE QUESTION, WHO DID IT? LIKELY TO BE ON MINDS OF MANY, ALAWITES IN PARTICULARLY LIKELY TO BE ASKING, WHO IS NEXT? PRESSURES ON ASAD TO PROTECT COMMUNITY WILL SUBSEQUENTLY INCREASE SHARPLY. WE TOLD BY ONE RELIABLE SOURCE THAT IN PAST FEW WEEKS SEVERAL RELATIVELY LOW-RANKING ALAWITE OFFICERS HAVE BEEN KILLED IN SYRIA, AND

REGIME HAS TRIED TO DOWNPLAY SIGNIFICANCE OF THESE DEATHS. SECOND SOURCE TOLD US THAT SEVEN ALAWITES WERE KILLED IN HAMA LAST WEEK. THESE INCIDENTS SUGGEST CONTINUING PATTERN OF VIOLENCE DIRECTED AGAINST ALAWITES, AND HAMA CONNECTION RAISES STRONG POSSIBILITY THAT CONSERVATIVE SUNNIS ENGAGED IN ANTI-ALAWITE SECTARIAN STRUGGLE. AS NOTED ABOVE, FADIL'S DEATH APPEARS TO BE VARIATION OF THIS PATTERN.

7. TIMING OF ASSASSINATION LESS THAN 24 HOURS AFTER SECRETARY DEPARTED DAMASCUS, PROMINENCE OF VICTIM AND BRAZENESS OF KILLERS SUGGEST POSSIBLE ATTEMPT TO COMPLICATE ASAD'S INVOLVEMENT IN SETTLEMENT PROCESS. WHILE PRESIDENT ENGAGED IN PUBLICIZED EFFORTS TO LAY GROUNDWORK FOR ROUND OF POSSIBLY RISKY DIPLOMACY, INCIDENT SERVES AS REMINDER TO ASAD THAT INTERNATIONAL OPPOSITION BOTH TO HIS REGIME AND HIS POLICIES EXIST. IF SUNNI OR ALAWITE GROUP PERPETUATED

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KILLING, WE CAN LOOK FORWARD TO ESCALATION OF DOMESTIC TENSIONS. IF IRAQIS OR PALESTINIAN REJECTIONISTS PLANNED MURDER, IT WOULD INDICATE THAT THEY HAVE SHIFTED THEIR STRATEGY AND THREAT OF VIOLENCE NOW HANGS OVER HEADS OF BROADER SPECTRUM OF SYRIAN OFFICIALS THAN ASAD'S IMMEDIATE ENTOURAGE. SYRIAN SECURITY SERVICES ARE UNDER HEAVY PRESSURE TO APPREHEND CULPRITS AND LEARN WHAT REALLY LAY BEHIND THIS TRAGIC AND UNTIMELY INCIDENT.

MURPHY

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
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Channel Indicators: n/a
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Disposition Approved on Date:
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Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
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Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
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Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
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Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770218/aaaaaqfj.tel
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Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
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Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
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Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3256147
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: ASSASSINATION OF DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY RECTOR THREATENS TO EXACERBATE SECTARIAN TENSIONS IN SYRIA
TAGS: PINS, SY, (FADIL, MUHAMMAD AL)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/ce3661c0-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009